THE LIGHTROOM SESSIONS – ORGANISING YOUR PHOTOS

(Taken from Adobe Photoshop Lightroom Classic CC – The Missing FAQ by Victoria Brampton)

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO ORGANIZE MY PHOTOS INTO FOLDERS?

Once you've decided where to store the photos on the hard drive, you then need to decide how to organise them. There's no right or wrong way of organising photos on your hard drive, but there are some basic principles that can help you avoid problems. It's worth spending the time to set up a logical folder structure before you start importing photos into Lightroom.

As far as Lightroom's concerned, your choice of folder structure doesn't make a lot of difference. Folders are just a place to store the photos, and you can use metadata and keywords to organize them. You could just dump them all into a single folder, but that would become unwieldy in time, so organisation helps. You may also want to find the photos outside of Lightroom, which may influence your choice of folder structure. We'll come back to some sample folder structures in a moment, but first, let's consider the basic principles behind the widely accepted best practices of digital asset management:

SCALABLE - You may only have a few thousand photos now, but your filing system needs to be capable of growing with you, without having to go back and change it. Can you go back and add new photos to your system without disturbing existing folders, especially if some of the folders are archived offline?

EASY BACKUP & RESTORE - Your folder structure needs to be easy to back up, otherwise you may miss some photos, and it needs to be easy to restore if you ever have a disaster. This is particularly important as your library grows and becomes split over multiple hard drives. Storing photos in a single parent folder (per drive), rather than scattering photos around your hard drives, makes it much easier to back up the photos, or move them onto another drive when you outgrow your current drive.

NO DUPLICATION - Each photo should be stored in a single location (in addition to your backups). Besides taking up additional hard drive space, having the same photo in multiple folders can create chaos when you start trying to add metadata or edit them.

STANDARD CHARACTERS - When naming your folders, stick to standard characters—A-Z, 0-9, hyphens (-) and underscores (_) - to prevent problems in the future.

CONSISTENT - You should always know where a photo should go without having to think about it. If you must debate each time, there's a higher chance of making a mistake.

WHY NOT ORGANIZE THE PHOTOS BY TOPIC?

Before you used photo management software, such as Lightroom, you may have organized your photos by subject, so why not carry on doing that? The main reason... a file can only be in one folder at a time, so if you divide your photos up by topic, how do you decide where a photo should go? For example, if you have a photo of John and Susan, should it go in the John folder or the Susan folder?

Perhaps you duplicate in both folders, but then, what happens when you have a larger group of people? Do you duplicate the photo in all their folders too, rapidly filling your hard drive and making it difficult to track? And if you duplicate the photo in multiple folders, when you come to edit that photo, do you have to update all the copies too?

Folders work best as storage buckets rather than organizing tools. If you keep a single copy of each photo (plus backups elsewhere, of course!) in a folder, you can then use keywords, collections and other metadata to group and find photos easily. Using metadata as your organizational tool, the photo of John and Susan may be stored in a single 2017/12 folder, but it would show up when you searched for photos of John, Susan, or even photos shot at a wedding.

WHY USE A DATE-BASED FOLDER STRUCTURE?

The simplest option for most people is to use a date-based folder structure. It ticks all the boxes, and more:

- It's scalable, because you just keep adding new dates to the end.
- It's easy to back up the original photos, even to write-once media like DVD/Bluray, because you're adding new photos to the latest folders. (Note that if you save derivative files with the original files, such as those edited in other software, you might still be adding photos to older folders too.)
- It's easy to restore from a good backup. In the event of a disaster, it's even possible to rebuild from files rescued by recovery software, because the capture dates are stored in the file metadata.
- It uses standard characters which are accepted by all operating systems. The folders can be nested with days inside of months inside of years, so you don't have a long unwieldy list of folders.
- Lightroom can create the folder structure for you automatically on import, so you don't even have to organize it manually. Photos synced from the Lightroom CC family of apps can also drop photos into the same folder structure.